



## Assessment in the Arts

Our goal is to support the arts and the vital, substantive impact they can have on student learning. Students are constructors of knowledge. They interpret information, integrate it with their previous understandings and construct new understandings of the world. Students as “learning-artists” should be given problems to solve that share features with those that intrigue professional artists. This enables students to engage in and identify with artistic processes central to creative thinking.

How can we assess accurately and fairly what our students have learned? This is a question every teacher and teaching artist wrestles with. When understanding is the purpose of instruction, the process of assessment is more than just one of evaluation, it is a substantive contribution to learning. Assessment needs to inform students, teachers and teaching artists about what students currently understand and about how to proceed with subsequent teaching and learning.

We encourage flexibility in the way projects are designed, implemented and modified. Evaluation methods should include a range of techniques to address important project questions. When quality arts teaching and ongoing assessment of understanding is aligned the students’ thinking and learning is made visible.

Students demonstrate understanding when they are able to apply learning in new ways, to think flexibly. Understanding performances help learners to build and express their understanding. The understanding performances are activities in which students reshape, expand upon, extrapolate from, apply and build upon what they already know.

Think of a director's work as (s)he prepares actors and crew for a stage production. Each rehearsal is a continuous cycle of performance and feedback as the actors work through the scenes. The director gives initial instructions, offers advice and further direction while each scene is in progress, and convenes more formal feedback sessions at various points during the rehearsal. This integration of performance and feedback is exactly what students need as they work to develop their understanding of a particular topic or concept. Ongoing assessment is the process of providing students with clear responses to their performances of understanding in a way that will help them develop and improve that understanding. This integration of performance and feedback is exactly what students need as they work to develop their understanding of a particular topic or concept. In this way the understanding goals -- what you want your students to understand -- and ongoing assessment -- the evidence that they understand it -- are tied together.

Consider the enduring understandings you want to build related to your curriculum. These are the lasting ideas or concepts that explain how the idea is important for the discipline and valuable to the individual student. What do you want your students to understand? (understanding goals) by doing this project or studying this curriculum? What will serve as evidence (ongoing assessment) that they understand it? Included below are some brief descriptions of a few alternative assessment tools that are particularly well suited to documentation of learning in the arts

## **Tools for Ongoing Assessment**

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessment is based on the idea that students can demonstrate what they are learning and what they understand through organized collections of their work. Learning can then be assessed through those collections. Portfolios are most revealing when students are engaged in sustained projects that call for original thinking. Engagement and inventiveness seem to develop most readily in classrooms in which students are given choices about the focus and direction of their work. Portfolios are most effective when students are doing authentic work in a discipline that is close in form and process to that done by adults in the domain or discipline.

#### **Key Ideas about Portfolio Assessment**

- ?? Assessment of portfolios reveals a student's particular profile of strengths and "chosen challenges."
- ?? Portfolio assessment is inseparable from learning and thus occurs at several points in the term rather than only at the end of the school term.
- ?? Assessment of portfolios recognizes student growth. Assessment provides a picture of development by comparing student work from at least two points in time.

(From Seidel & Walters, 1990)

### **Rubrics**

Rubrics, like portfolios, exhibitions and other authentic approaches to assessment blur the distinction between teaching and assessment. They exist as a compliment to instruction. A rubric is a type of scoring guide that expresses more than one level of achievement for one or more criteria. An instructional rubric is often used with a relatively complex assignment and provides students with informative feedback about their works in progress and their final products.

A rubric:

- ?? Is related to an authentic learning in the subject area.
- ?? Includes subject-specific content.
- ?? Focuses on subject-specific knowledge or skill.
- ?? Describes or specifies levels of achievement.

Although the format of an instructional rubric can vary, all rubrics have two features in common: 1) a list of criteria or what counts in a project and 2) gradations of quality of student work.

Instructional rubrics have several features that support student learning. They:

- ?? are written in language that students can understand

- ?? refer to common weaknesses in students' work and indicate how such weaknesses can be avoided
- ?? can be used by students to evaluate their works-in-progress and thereby guide revision and improvement

Learning improves when feedback reminds students of the need to monitor their learning and guides them in how to achieve learning objectives. Students themselves can be the source of feedback, given the appropriate conditions and supports.  
(Brophy, 2000, Andrade 1999)

### **The Role of Questioning Techniques.**

Questions help guide students' reflective thinking about the work they made and the work they've observed. Open-ended questions prompt the student to engage more deeply in the thinking process and help to guide the inquiry. By open-ended we mean problems without clearly defined methods of solution and without one right answer. These are the kinds of issues that professionals in the arts work on. No one tells a painter what to paint or how to paint it; nor does anyone tell a conductor how to perform a score. Students too can be given problems that they must define and solve for themselves. In looking at pieces of performance or fine art work we want to ask students "What's going on here?" (understanding) and "What do you see that makes you think so?" (evidence/assessment). Good questions help students to be energetic thinkers.

What do you learn by making the work and what do you learn by watching?  
How can reflection and questioning techniques help us to make considered choices?

Both the Lincoln Center Institute and Harvard Project Muse (Museums Uniting with Schools in Education) Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education: Quest (Questions for Understanding, Exploring, Seeing and Thinking about the arts) have developed a framework and a series of questions that help students build their receptivity to experiencing any given art work and the ability to reflect upon that experience. You may contact them directly for additional information.

Deborah Brzoska who works as a consultant with The Kennedy Center arts education programs suggests a method called "Quick Write" as part of a teachers 'and teaching artists' program or project evaluation.

### **Quick Write**

1. In my arts education project, one main thing I am trying to accomplish is...
2. I will know I have accomplished this when I see....

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